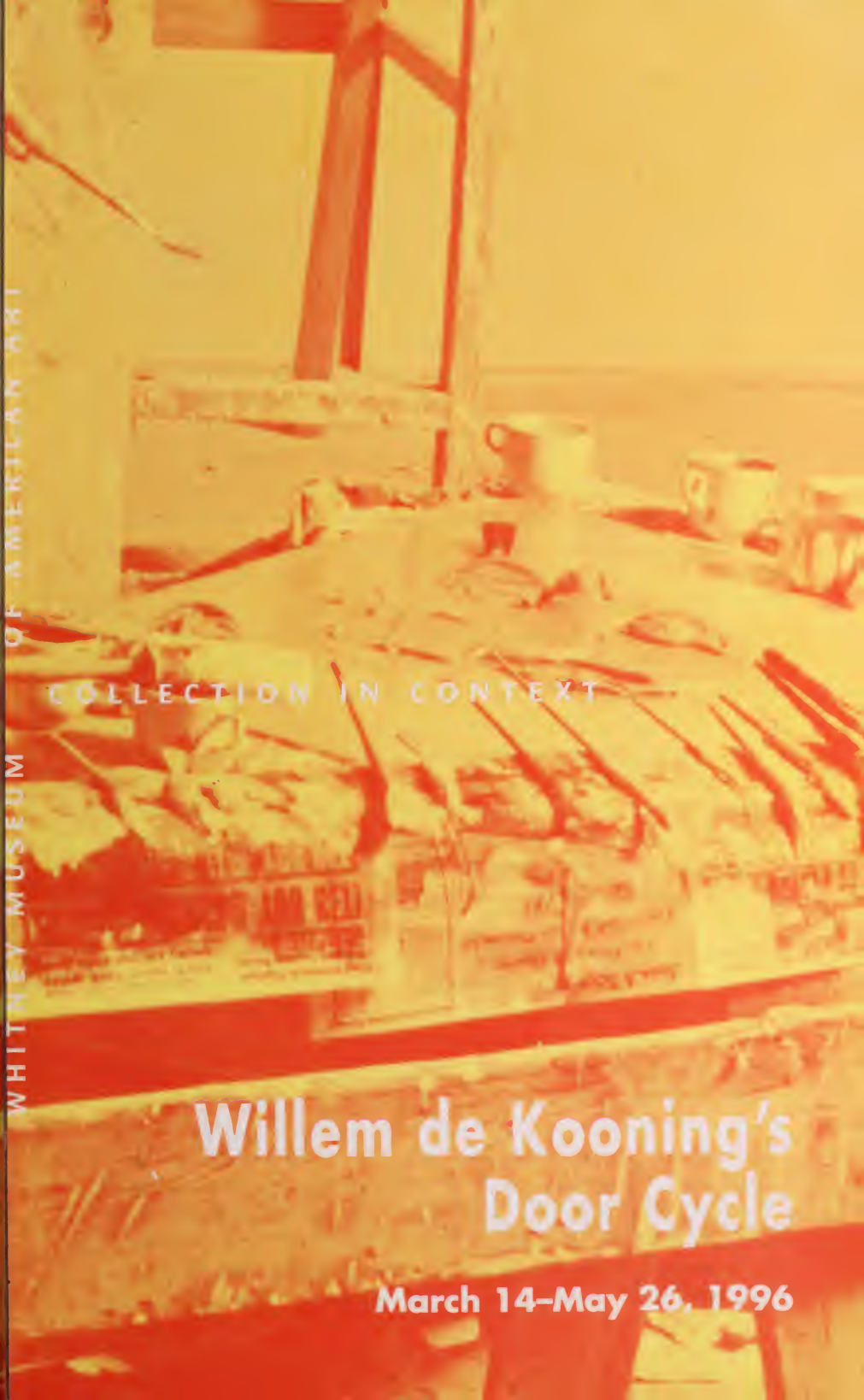


WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

COLLECTION IN CONTEXT

Willem de Kooning's Door Cycle

March 14–May 26, 1996

The Whitney Museum is fortunate to possess five major paintings by Willem de Kooning. These works trace many of the turbulent and frequent shifts that occurred in the artist's oeuvre over a thirty-year period. In particular, they chronicle his recurring concern with the figure and the landscape.

In the mid-1960s, de Kooning used hollow-core doors as the support for what resulted in three extraordinary paintings of the female figure. A fourth painting, *Woman Accabonac* (1966), a renowned masterwork in the Whitney Museum's collection painted in a nearly identical format, is considered to be an extension of this Door series.

It seems particularly appropriate that de Kooning used a door as his painting surface. The door, a place where the inside meets the outside, is a perfect metaphor for the subjects themselves. In these works, figure and setting are virtually indistinguishable. The unruly forms of these women suggest strange, disembodied landscapes. The fact that de Kooning himself used titles with geographical locations to identify three of these paintings—Accabonac, Springs, and Sag Harbor—further proposes an intentional fusion of figure and ground, interior and exterior space. Entranced and disoriented by the nervous twists and turns of his brushstrokes, one soon realizes that these works are not so much about women or landscapes as about the mind of the artist.

This exhibition, skillfully curated by Judith Hoos Fox, gives a marvelous, focused view of de Kooning's stylistic and technical process. We are grateful to Fox for reuniting these works and for her insightful and informative essay.

Adam D. Weinberg
Curator, Permanent Collection

Organized by Judith Hoos Fox, curator, the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, where the exhibition originated.

The exhibition is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lobby Gallery Associates of the Whitney Museum.

Willem de Kooning's Door Cycle

Between 1964 and 1965, Willem de Kooning painted a series of female figures on hollow-core wood doors that signaled a shift in his thematic concerns from the abstract images of the early 1960s. He now returned to the figure, embraced a pastoral notion, and refocused on woman as subject. The Door paintings are remarkable in the context of de Kooning's work. Full-standing, frontal, framed within the confines of the elongated door format, the female figures hover, suspended without setting.[1] Similar in palette—orange, red, gold, mustard, and acidic green—the figures contain motion within their difficult-to-decipher poses: arms akimbo, elbows raised, breasts swaying, hair streaming and swooping. Yet within this coherence, de Kooning encapsulates the range of his stylistic concerns, recapitulating the harpies of the 1950s and forecasting the open, relaxed forms of the 1980s. The soft, unfocused, wide-set eyes and the sensuous mouth with lips parted in *Woman*, and the extended strokes here as well as in *Woman Springs* and *Woman Accabonac*, introduce the broad, languid swathes of paint that characterize de Kooning's works of the 1970s and 1980s.[2] The Door paintings mark de Kooning's ability to embrace opposites, to contradict, to synthesize, as he summarizes his past, relinquishes it, and sets a course for the years to come. Furthermore, this suite of works indicates his engagement with contemporary social issues of the day.

This exhibition reunites the four known completed Door paintings. Three are actually painted on doors: *Woman Springs*, *Woman, Sag Harbor*, and *Woman*. *Woman Accabonac* is integral to this cycle, derived from de Kooning's practice of tracing and making transfers from images. It is a painting on paper mounted on canvas and just 1 inch smaller in each dimension than the door's standard 80 x 36 inches. Moreover, it began as a transfer from an image painted on one of the doors.

Also included are oil transfers, essential to de Kooning's painting technique and his method of building images. Preferring to paint wet-into-wet, de Kooning would blot the surface of his paintings with newspaper or vellum to extend the drying time. The result of this method was a transferred image onto newspaper or vellum which de Kooning often reworked, painting directly on the transferred images and adding to them with collage. Color, image, and date link these oil transfers to the Door paintings. The 1964 *Woman* is a nearly full-size transfer from *Woman, Sag Harbor* that de Kooning augmented with direct markings in the lower portion. Subjects range from figures to landscape, and in one figure merges with landscape (*Woman in Landscape*). De Kooning's direct painting dominates in some (*Springs Landscape*); the rough, pulled surface of transferred paint dominates in others. The transfers were a part of his process of reusing images, first in one canvas and then another, as well as a measure of his

enthusiastic and experimental approach to painting. That Hans Namuth photographed one of the oil transfers—in isolation, centered within his viewfinder as an intentional and formal still life—indicates their importance as independent works of art, as records of de Kooning's process, as part of his repeated analyses of form, and as documents of the many permutations of each painting.[3]

That these works were created at a turning point in de Kooning's career may explain the pivotal place they hold in his oeuvre. By the mid-1960s, de Kooning's reputation was firmly established. His work had been included in two Venice Biennales, in 1950 and 1954, and in the 1955 Carnegie International. Joseph Hirshhorn had been collecting his work since 1957. In 1964 he received both the Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded by Lyndon B. Johnson, and the Guggenheim International Award. Extensive coverage in the media, including the publication of a photograph of the artist taken by Hans Namuth on the cover of *Newsweek*, brought de Kooning to the attention of the general public. At this time, he moved from New York City to Long Island.

Much has been written and many photographic images have been made of the spacious, light-filled studio de Kooning designed and had built in The Springs. John McMahon, de Kooning's studio assistant during those years, recounts that de Kooning—attuned to every detail of the studio—was dissatisfied with the hollow-core doors that had been installed and had them replaced with sturdier doors.[4] The unwanted doors were set aside. McMahon describes discussions with de Kooning about whether these cast-offs could be painted on. He prepared the doors for de Kooning, sealing them on both sides with gesso primer and griege off-white oil paint, repeatedly painting and sanding them and then attaching handles for moving them.

Woman, Sag Harbor, the first of the paintings in the cycle, sets a trajectory for the subsequent Door paintings and summarizes earlier concerns. It is arguably the last of the depictions of women as aggressive harpies that had characterized the artist's imagery in the 1950s. In her frontal stance, with teeth bared and eyes glaring, the female figure becomes a threatening assailant. She is an embodiment of emotive power pulsing through the bloody colors, through the frenzy of gesture.

The physicality of de Kooning's process is evident in the ravaged surface of *Woman Accabonac*, where tape and patches are bonded with the surface by paint and image. The serrated edge of a newspaper page, traces of his blotting with newspaper, is evident in *Woman Springs* as an inscribed diagonal at the midpoint of its complex surface, a virtual encyclopedia of paint textures resulting from de Kooning's wild embrace of techniques.

Departing from earlier readings of the women in the Door cycle as hieratic harpies, Judith Zilczer has recently recognized elements of comedy and self-portraiture.[5] *Woman* (1965), recalling the artist's images of Mae West and Marilyn Monroe, is the most sensuous depiction in the quartet; here idolatry

replaces savagery. *Woman Accabonac* and *Woman Springs* cohere as comediennes and caricatures with their cartoonlike eyes and smeared lipstick. Richard Schiff has associated these devices with a newspaper photograph of cheerleaders that de Kooning had in his studio; he also cites images of fashion models of the day.[6] In these contexts, areas of ambiguity become more legible as we see the long legs of jumping women dangling in mid-air; knees, elbows, and breasts protruding prominently; fabric clinging and swirling; large swathes of blond hair sweeping and billowing; lips and eyes heavily outlined in makeup. De Kooning's gestural indications of the fashions of the time embrace the exuberance of that era of exploration, revolution, and change.

De Kooning's startling images of women in the Door paintings have been read from other viewpoints as well. The last three decades of critical and expository writing include psychological interpretations of his imagery,[7] anecdotal and discursive recollections,[8] and poetic affirmations.[9] Recent analyses offer an enlarged and focused understanding of these works, including discussion of the sources and meanings of the figures' poses and detailed descriptions of the artist's painting techniques.[10] Contextual analyses draw on social history and popular culture to investigate the impact of the sexual revolution on de Kooning's work, the rapid expansion of the media, and the changing role of women. The related artistic impulses of de Kooning's contemporaries, other than the Abstract Expressionists, have also been considered.[11]

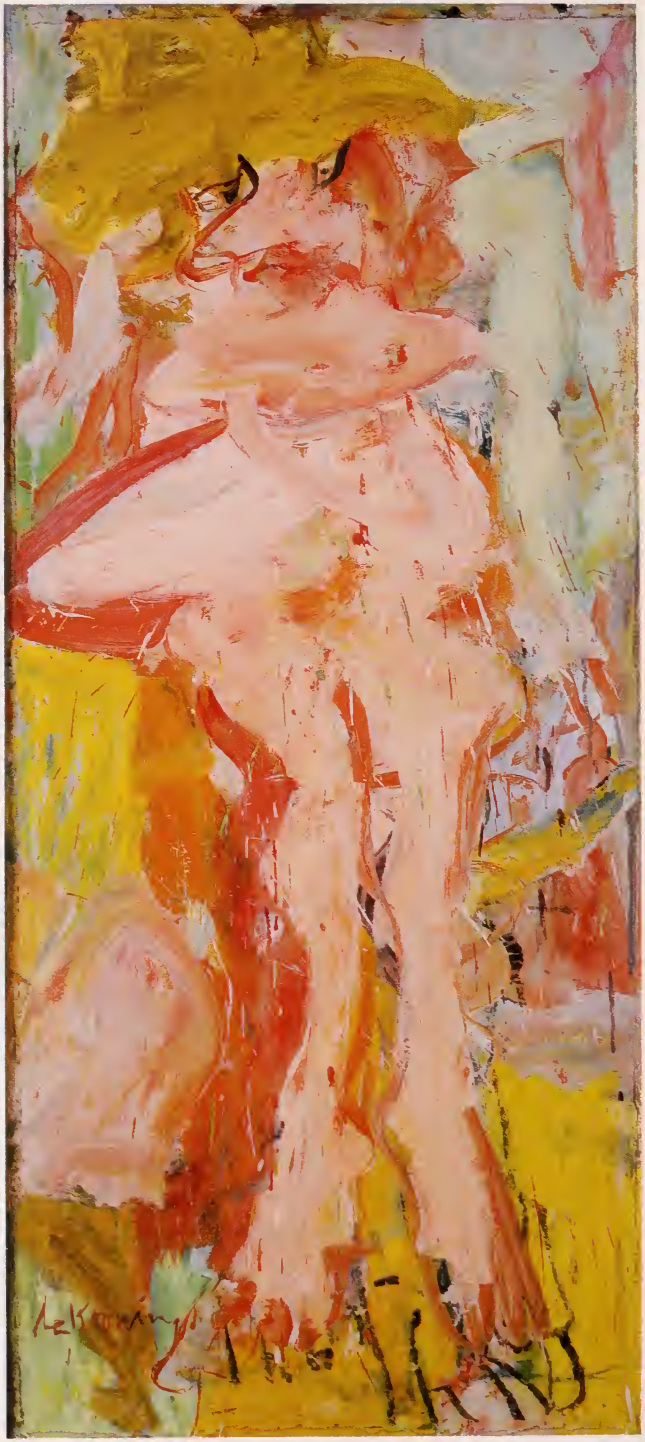
Still unexplored is de Kooning's role as a social commentator. Adulation, disdain, mockery, affection—the range of affect displayed in his depictions of women in the Door paintings expresses specific sentiments which, because of their similarity in format, read as options rather than archetypes, images of women rather than of Woman. In the oil transfers, the pairing of transferred images with printed text on the newspaper may not have been accidental, once de Kooning began to consciously use the process to create works in themselves. The printed fashion illustrations visible in *Anniversary* and *Woman in Landscape*, coupled with the exuberant images of women, recount a descriptive narrative about contemporary lifestyle. And the contrast of image and title in *Springs Landscape*, with its page from Manhattan real estate listings, is too pointed to be coincidental. Related evidence of de Kooning's engagement in contemporary events is his 1964 *Reclining Man (John F. Kennedy)*, an image of the slain president, supine, his flesh pierced, the blood drained out of his lifeless body. In this eloquent lament, the artist has turned his consummate mastery of painting to historical narration.[12]

Perhaps the three decades that separate us from the Door cycle and the image of Kennedy afford a perspective from which de Kooning might now be considered as both a chronicler of his milieu and a commentator on his times.

Judith Hoos Fox

Woman, Sag Harbor, 1964

Woman, 1965



Woman Accabonac, 1966

Woman Springs, 1966

Notes

1. De Kooning at one point considered joining the door panels together to form a screen, but "decided that the panels looked better alone and abandoned the grand scheme"; Lynne Cooke, "De Kooning and the Pastoral: The Interrupted Idyll," in Judith Zilczer, *Willem de Kooning from the Hirshhorn Museum Collection* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), p. 100. John McMahon, de Kooning's studio assistant at the time, remarked that de Kooning's interest was in painting itself and in the individual paintings rather than in the construction screens; conversation with John McMahon, April 19, 1995. Both these lines of reasoning may have been valid.

2. De Kooning's titles refer to specific locations on Long Island (the towns of The Springs and Sag Harbor and the Accabonac River) and the women he would meet there; see Willem de Kooning, in Harold Rosenberg, "Interview with Willem de Kooning," *Art News*, 71 (September 1972), p. 58.

3. John McMahon regrets that he did not photograph the progress of each painting daily, though he did so for *Woman Accabonac*. These photographs are located in the Willem de Kooning office in New York, which serves as an archive on the artist and his work.

For over four decades, Hans Namuth photographed de Kooning. The Hans Namuth archives are housed at the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, which generously opened its archives for my research and lent photographs to this exhibition. Namuth's photographs include portraits of de Kooning, views of him at work and with his family, and views of his studio and of paintings in progress.

4. Conversation with John McMahon, April 24, 1995; McMahon suggests that perhaps six to eight doors were painted. A contemporary account, however, indicates that de Kooning ordered six doors with the intention of painting them; see Brian O'Doherty, "De Kooning: Grand Style," *Newsweek*, January 4, 1965, p. 57.

5. Judith Zilczer, "*Woman, Sag Harbor* and the Origins of the 'Door Paintings,'" in Judith Hoos Fox, *Willem de Kooning's Door Cycle*, exh. cat. (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, 1995), unpaginated.

6. Richard Schiff, "Water and Lipstick: De Kooning in Transition," in Marla Prather, *Willem de Kooning: Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p.37.

7. Estella Lauter, "Homage to Anima: The Psychological and Cultural Implications of Willem de Kooning's Images of Women," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 59 (1976), pp. 426–35.

8. Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968).

9. Andrew Forge, "De Kooning's Women," *Studio International*, 176 (December 1968), pp. 246–51.

10. Shiff, "Water and Lipstick," pp. 33–63.

11. Cooke, "De Kooning and the Pastoral," pp. 95–96.

12. Judith Zilczer identified the figure as President John F. Kennedy in her wall text for the exhibition "Willem de Kooning from the Hirshhorn Collection," 1993, based on unpublished notes from the Hirshhorn Collections' Archives files on de Kooning.

Works in the Exhibition

All paintings and oil transfers are by Willem de Kooning. All reproductions of the artist's work ©1995 Willem de Kooning/Artists Rights Society, New York

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth

Anniversary, 1964
Oil and collage on newsprint mounted on masonite panel. 40 1/4 x 34 15/16
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Gift of Vicci Sperry

July Fete in Plattsburgh, 1964
Oil and newspaper on masonite. 44 x 29
Private collection, courtesy Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Woman, 1964
Oil on vellum paper mounted on paperboard mounted on fiberboard. 76 3/8 x 35 3/8
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.,
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

Woman in Landscape, 1964
Oil and newspaper on board. 43 x 29
Private collection, courtesy Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Woman, Sag Harbor, 1964
Oil on wood. 80 x 36
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.,
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

Woman, 1965
Oil on wood. 80 x 36
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.,
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

Springs Landscape, 1966
Oil on paper. 22 x 28
Private collection, courtesy Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Woman, 1966
Oil on newsprint mounted on masonite. 29 x 22
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. William P. Youngdahl III

Woman Accabonac, 1966
Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 79 x 55
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Purchase, with funds from the artist and Mrs. Bernard F. Gimbel. 67.75

Woman Springs, 1966
Oil on wood. 80 x 36
Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts; Gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., in memory of John McAndrew.

Front and back cover: Hans Namuth photograph of Willem de Kooning at work on the Door cycle (detail). ©1991 Hans Namuth Estate

Inside front: *Woman Accabonac*, 1966 (detail)
This page: *Woman Springs*, 1966 (detail)

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